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Holocaust Survivor Memoir

By Maria Jutasi Coleman

CHAPTER I MY FAMILY

My first memory is visually vague but emotionally strong. It is of my father in a hospital bed, I am kissing his hand that is inertly lying on the white blanket. I am two years old, and my father is dying at age 37 of cancer. There is a photograph of me in the courtyard of the hospital. I am wearing a white dress, I have dark curls and I am crying angrily.

The next memory is a mixture of heavy feelings and absences. The place is a veranda where I am lying on a chaise lounge wrapped in a coarse blanket. I cannot move; I am not supposed to and cannot because I am too tightly bundled. This scene is in a sanatorium for sick children in the beautiful Alps. I am not sick but was taken there because in the nearby hotel, my mother is recovering from her grief after my father's death. I was originally with her, but being two and a half years old, I exhibited too many tantrums for the management of the resort. Recently, I read somewhere the account of a psychiatrist who wrote that people

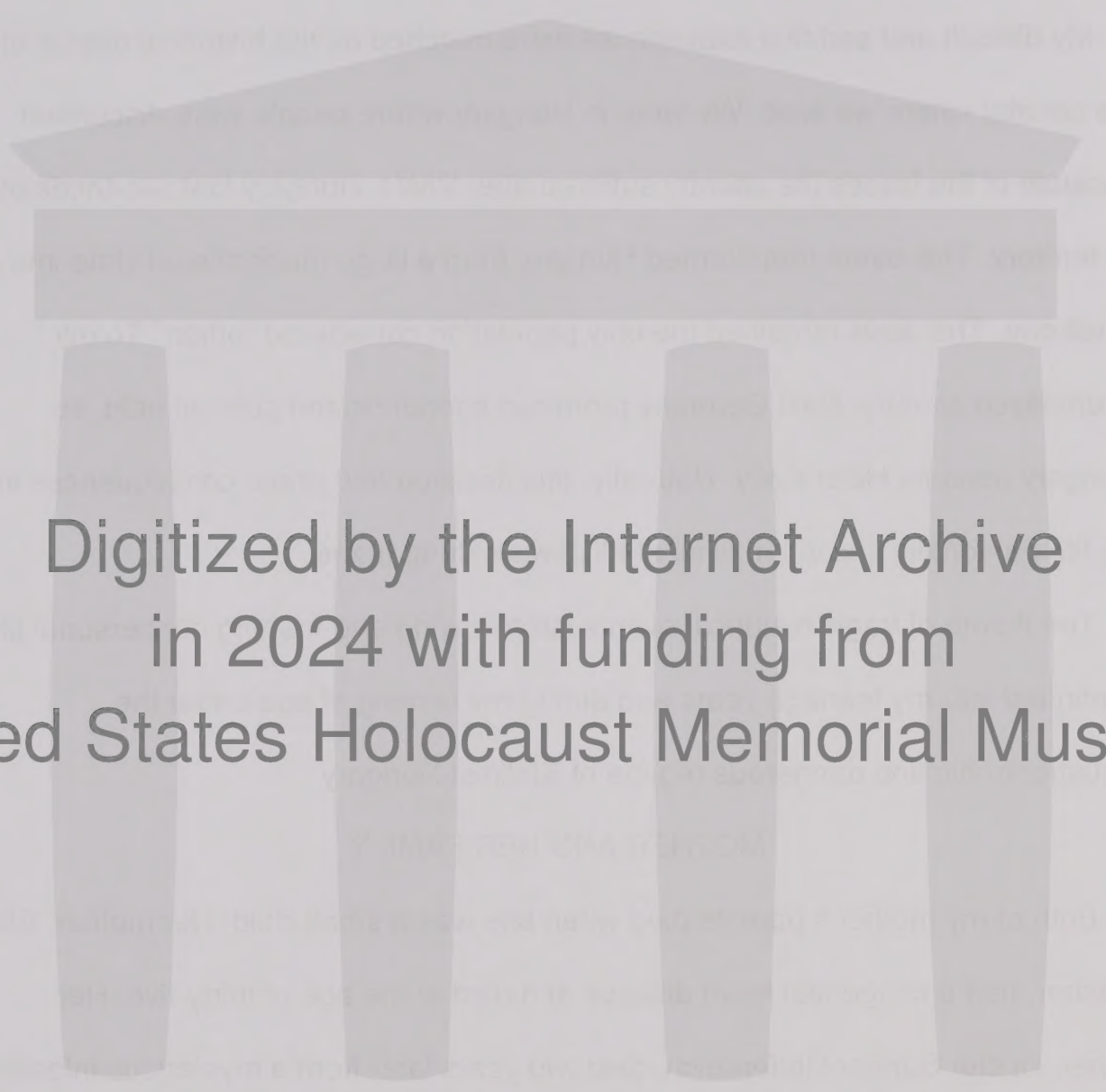
who are in the shock of grief feel like they are wrapped in a cocoon or a blanket. Is my memory of being bound real or did I just feel like being bound after I lost my father and was separated from my mother?

My difficult and sad first experiences were matched by the historical events of the country where we lived. We were in Hungary where people were discontent because of the losses the country suffered after WW I. Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory. This event transformed Hungary from a large multinational state into a small one. The Jews remained the only population considered "other." To my traumatized country, Nazi Germany promised economic and political help, so Hungary became Hitler's ally. Naturally, this decision had grave consequences in my life personally and in the lives of all Jewish Hungarians.

The theme of tragic historical events interweaving and framing my personal life continued into my teenage years and during my coming of age under the claustrophobic and dangerous regime of Stalinist Hungary.

MOTHER AND HER FAMILY

Both of my mother's parents died when she was a small child. Her mother, Ella Meitner, had a congenital heart disease and died at the age of thirty-five. Her father, Doctor Sandor Hoffenreich, died two years later from a mysterious infection in a mental hospital. Nobody told me this, but I suspect that he had syphilis, as many of his contemporaries did. My mother's difficult life started with his illness. She was sent from one relative to another. One of her uncles, with whom she stayed first, also died. When my mother talked to me about her childhood, she always identified herself as an orphan without a steady home. That made me sad.



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My mother, Susanna, (as she was called in the States) and her sister Katherine (Kato) were very different in nature. Katherine was a child prodigy who played piano concertos before she was ten years old. She was also bookish, while my mother was social and fun loving. Something was wrong with Kato's face. Her expressions seemed to be frozen, and her movements were rigid and ungraceful. She was extremely intelligent perhaps an idiot savant. In later years when the two sisters were mature women and lived in the U.S., Katherine loved my mother, but Susanna did not like her sister.

In the park, in Budapest, where my mother used to take me, there was a spastic young woman who walked toward the same bench every day. I asked my mother, "Does Aunt Kato look like this young woman?"

Mama was shaken by that question. She said, "Oh my, why do you say that?" "I remember her that way." Mother denied that her sister was like that girl. When I was twenty- five, I met Kato again and I understood the resemblance. She had a rigid posture and walked with an uncertain gait. She seemed to be put together mechanically. The harmony of most organic bodies was missing in her. Her speech lacked the emotions that serve as a liquid pool that gives fluidity and depth to words. Her communication was dry and missed transitions. I found her strange.

My mother's uncle Dezso was the head of the family. He must have been in his forties when he was killed by the fascists. I remember his scrappy face that he liked to rub against my little girl's skin. He worked and was away a lot. I was much closer to his wife Olga. She was a zaftig, warm and vivacious woman. She liked to play cards, spoiled her only daughter, and loved me. She used to reign over the

family dinner parties on religious holidays. Olga enjoyed life so much. The only daughter's name was Yvette. She was tall and moderately attractive. Also she whined a lot; professionally she was a theatrical reporter who had a good reputation. Yvette was in her twenties with life's possibilities unfolding ahead of her when she was shot and killed by the Nazis.

The grandmother was called Mutti by all. That ironically is the German way of saying mommy. She cooked the best chocolate cakes. When I visited she always made one and let me lick the bowls. Mutti did all this baking but could not eat sweets. She had diabetes and had to use saccharin. All four were shot into the Danube River.

My mother was 26 years old when she became a widow in 1937. I was her only child. I found out years after that she was expecting a second child when the doctors told her that my father had no more than six months to live. She felt that she couldn't nurse her dying husband while carrying a baby and giving birth right after his death. She had an abortion. My father's death marked the end of nuclear family life for us. From then on, I was placed in boarding schools except for short periods.

I am looking at a photograph of my mother. The photograph has the brownish sepia color of old times. She was probably in her late twenties or early thirties when this picture was taken. She is walking down the steps of what looks like a resort hotel. There is an arch behind her, and blooming trees flank the stairway. She is elegant and she is smiling. Her smile isn't the American full smile but a half

smile. Is it a sad smile? The definition of the picture is not very good, so I can't be sure.

Her hair is parted in the middle, and I remember its color as raven black. She has an oval face, not beautiful, but pleasant with a perfect nose and full lips. Perhaps the weakest part of her face are her eyes. They are not large and are medium brown. In the picture, she is slender and full-breasted. In later years, she became rounder but kept her long pretty legs. The family lore was that when I was little I said, "I love my Mama because she smells good." I do remember her smelling of delicate perfume (I think Chanel 5) and of her very own "Mama fragrance." I liked to snuggle up to her. She wore soft angoras and silks and followed the latest fashion.

It is hard for me to write about her character. She was a person of many contradictions. There was something very sad about her, though she often laughed and talked gregariously. It was as if there were two Mamas, one sad and silent, and the other trying to be happy in a desperate way. She did not let herself be sad. From the earliest times I can remember, there was fear in her eyes when she looked at me. It was as if she feared that some tragedy would happen to me too. She must have readied herself because at the time of real danger to my existence, she was strong and brave. At other times, she was weak and childish. I would have liked a mother who was more conventional, who kept house and cooked and was married. She remained a widow, though she did have male friends all along. After my father's death and later the death of all the members of her family in 1944, she gave up on family life altogether.

My mother loved classical music and studied singing. In her youth, she liked sports, but by the time I knew her, she wasn't physically active. During the Communist era, she became a voice teacher, and I think she liked that work. Mama had a great sense of humor and she loved to laugh. My best memories with her are making fun of situations and laughing. Given the miserable political situation we lived in, her sense of humor was a saving grace.

FATHER AND HIS FAMILY

My father's name was Vilmos Junger. In the few photographs left of him he looks dashing. In his portraits, his dark hair is oiled down to give a perfect frame to his handsome features. His brown eyes have a confident expression. He is aware of his good looks. In the snap shots, he looks tall and slender. I was told that he liked to play tennis and loved kayaking, that he was funny and that he loved me. My main source of information was my mother, but she rarely talked about him.

Father was the oldest son in a very large family. Exactly how large, I do not know. My mother remembered nineteen, but my cousin remembers seventeen children. I know of five who survived by the time my mother met my father. When they met, his mother was alive, but she died of tuberculosis by the time they married a year or two after. Her name was Amalia, but I do not know her maiden name. I have a picture of her with her two sisters. She is beautiful while the sisters are not. They don't look like her at all.

Vilmos's father was a tailor in a small town called Nagybanya in Hungary. He died young from a wound he received in World War I. I don't even know his first name. He had blue eyes, I was told, while the rest of the Jungers had dark brown

eyes. My father studied in a Yeshiva, an orthodox Jewish school, but had to leave at the death of his father in order to earn money for the family, since he was the oldest son. Vilmos had to finish high school when he was already married to my mother, and he must have been in his early thirties. He worked as a tax collector for the city of Budapest. Both my parents were Jewish. Mother's family was assimilated, observing very few rituals, while father's was more religious. There was a pronounced class difference, too, between the two families.

Though my father had many siblings, only four were living by the time I was born; two sisters and two brothers. The oldest brother was Mishy, a nickname for Michael. I remember him as dark complexioned and not as handsome as the other Jungers. He was a jeweler. Mishy made a little necklace for me when I was born. It had an octagonal medal that had my name, Marika, and my birth date. It was a sweet delicate present that I was allowed to wear on special occasions. I don't know where it is now. I rarely saw Mishy because after my father's death, my mother severed the ties to his family. The reason for this split was never discussed in my presence.

The younger of the two brothers was Tibi. I remember him with thick glasses and quite skinny. Both brothers were killed in concentration camps.

I knew my Aunts, Jolan and Ella much better. I insisted on seeing Jolan from time to time. When I was little, my mother brought me to her but never came into her house. She was the youngest. Jolan was very attractive. Her strong legs and round arms gave her an earthy quality. I felt that she loved me. Evidently, she was close to my mother while my father was alive and helped her raise me.

The story I heard was that when I was a newborn, my mother was afraid to bathe me, so Jolan did it, though she was younger and also inexperienced. The two women spent a lot of time together, but after my father's death, they had a serious disagreement and pulled apart. I think that they were both so upset by his death that they turned against each other. I have observed that this happens in families. They never reconciled. At any rate, Jolan and I remained close. Whenever I came to visit her she made a big fuss. She introduced me to neighbors and friends, "This is my beloved brother's child. She looks very much like her father. He was handsome and a very good man." It was nice to hear good things about him, since my mother mainly remembered what she didn't like about her husband. I think this was her way to deal with loss, but it didn't feel good to me. I also hated when my mother and my aunt said negative things about each other.

Jolan's older sister was Ella. I wasn't really close to her. I never went to where she lived, but used to see her sometimes at Jolan's. She was tall and had beautiful features. Ella was sick with tuberculosis which was in remission, but I heard that she had to go to the hospital once a month to inflate her lungs. I was somewhat scared of her. She also made me feel guilty by telling me that I didn't love her, which was true enough, but she made loving her difficult. She died from tuberculosis not much after the war ended.

CHAPTER II

MY CHILDHOOD

The first home I remember is the apartment in Hattyu Street in Buda. (Hattyu means swan). Budapest is the place of my birth. It is the capital city of Hungary in

the middle of Europe. The city is divided by the Danube into Buda and Pest. Pest is the commercial and cultural center and Buda is residential and rather beautiful since it spreads over hills. We lived in Buda under the Varhegy where the ancient castles are.

One of my strongest memories from that apartment is Christmas. We celebrated that Aryan holiday in spite of being Jews. This shows how very assimilated my family was. In the Hattyu street apartment there was a big double hung glass door between my room and my mother's room. On my side of the panels there were drapes that made whatever happened in her room invisible to me. Of course when I wanted to know what was happening on the other side of the door I could secretly lift the corner of the curtain and peek out.

Christmas in Hungary happened in one evening the night before. It came suddenly, miraculously brought by angels who loved children. While my relatives were preparing the tree, to prevent my spying, this Christmas Eve's afternoon my Aunt Iren (whom I called Fairy Irie) took me for a walk or a visit. I don't remember exactly what happened but I do remember the feeling of expectation that was almost unbearable.

When finally the time came and we went home I entered in my mother's room where the Christmas tree was. I was told that an angel put it there. I was breathless because the tree was very beautiful. Under the tree were toys for me. The most important present was a light blue doll carriage I remember it so well. This blue carriage was sweet, old fashioned and had everything a real carriage was supposed to have. You could pull up the hood to protect the baby from the

sun or the rain. It had springs to rock my baby doll that also looked quite real. She had short hair and bent chubby legs. I loved to dress her in real baby cloth and take her out for walks. My other most memorable present was a red tricycle at another Christmas. I grew into middle childhood in this home with my mother and a maid named Eva until the Nazis forced us to move into the ghetto of Budapest.

While we lived in Hattyu Street I had a close friend, a boy slightly younger than me. His name was Hanzi. He lived across from us with his family. We got to know each other because my mother was an old friend of his father. Hanzi and I played together every day. Because he was younger than me and delicate, he was like a younger brother for me. He easily broke down into crying, while I myself rarely cried. I looked down on him for his weaknesses but I also loved him. We were inseparable until we had to go to the ghetto.

I met Hanzi after the war was over. He was an orphan. His mother died while hiding, from an infection that was lethal without medical care. His father died in a concentration camp. Hanzi lived with a distant relative. He was different. We were both different and could not get back to the closeness we had.

Hungary in the late 1930s became more and more anti-Semitic. This despising of the Jews was nothing new. Its open manifestations had to do with the country's relationship to Germany. Hitler was getting ready to wage war on Europe and used anti Semitic feelings to ignite people for his war.

Before I became school age, probably when I was four or five years old, I was put in a boarding school where my mother's Aunt Adele was the vice director. The place was a beautiful villa on a mountain close to Budapest. It was called

Swabhegy. There was a cable car that took people up from the city. I don't remember how long I was there; to me it seemed too long. It wasn't a bad place but I missed my mother and my home. It was the scene of my only violent act that I can remember. A girl threw herself on me, and to get her off I bit her hard. There was a whole hullabaloo about this.

In 1941, I was back home with my mother. At the age of six I had a great desire to go to school and learn. Before I entered first grade, I had to have my tonsils taken out. For this reason I had to start school a few days later than the other children. I was heart broken. I told my mother that I didn't want to be stupid because of a delayed start. This excitement about learning has remained with me to this day.

The photo of myself I remember most was taken around this time period. It was perhaps a school picture when I entered first grade. This would explain the Hungarian tricolor ribbon of red, white and green that is on the cardboard on which the photo is mounted. I am sitting on a chair wearing a plaid skirt and matching blouse with puffy short sleeves. I have long brown banana curls, a high forehead and big dark eyes. My features are fine and my arms and legs slender. It is a picture of a pretty but sad little girl. The sadness is understandable considering the circumstances. Looking at this picture, I remember a more frivolous trauma, the moment when my curls were cut. In the middle of the school year my mother decided that my hair should be cut short because it was difficult to keep it neat. This haircut threw me in a crisis because with short hair I felt ugly.

The air raids of the Allied Forces had already started. Our school had no bomb shelters; therefore, we children had to run home whenever there was a raid. We were taken to the exits of the school by the teachers and told to run home as fast as we could. I remember vividly the blaring of the siren above me. I tried to hold my ears while running but this wasn't easy. I was scared and home seemed very far though it must have been only about ten blocks away. My mother ran toward me and we hurried into the shelter under our building.

Besides running under the scary sirens, part of my daily life experience was to be called a "Dirty Jew" by the other children. At the time this did not make any sense to me.

I asked my Mother, "Mama, why do the other children call me 'Dirty Jew'? I wash every morning and my dresses are always clean."

"It has nothing to do with that. The children hear those expressions from the adults and repeat them without thinking," She said. "But what is important is that you must never respond to them. You must never be angry and call them names. You mustn't! You understand?"

"Yes, but they spit on me, Mama".

"I know sweetie, I am sorry".

"They also tell me that I killed Jesus. How could I have killed a grown up? Why do they say that?"

"They learned that in church, I am afraid. Of course they are wrong. You have nothing to do with the death of Jesus. Don't worry, but don't ever say anything. Just keep walking or look away."

“But it makes me very angry when they tell me those things that are not true. I want to call them liars and I want to punch them.”

“You can not show your anger. Don’t you ever touch those children. The Gentiles can denounce us and we could end up in the Gestapo. You know that is very dangerous? Don’t you?”

I could sense that her words were heavy, and that life depended on my remaining silent. It was enough to be denounced by a gentile if you were a Jew which resulted in arrest and deportation to what we later learned, were the death camps.

Many years later in Chicago, I talked about my experiences in Nazi Hungary to a large group of grade school students. They could not believe that I had no police or any other public agency to defend me. We were at the mercy of anyone who was an Aryan.

I listened to my mother and never responded to the abusive words or the spitting on my clothes. This holding back of a response predisposed me not to trust the outside world, not to trust the public with my private truth. I stopped declaring what I really felt or repeating what was said at home. This was also useful later when we lived under Stalinism when a wrong word could land a family in jail.

During the years of my forced silence, I had vowed silently that one day I shall vindicate. I kept repeating to myself, “I’m gonna get you!” This helped me to live through this period without major damage to my self- respect.

My life in the Hattyu Street apartment ended when the Nazi and the Hungarian Arrow Cross ordinance wanted all the Jews in Budapest in a ghetto. This was in the fall of 1944. (The Arrow Cross were the Hungarian equivalents of Nazis, just as vicious). We were to leave our homes and crowd into apartments in a small area that was designated for us in the city. By this time we were to wear the yellow Star of David on our chests whenever we were in a public place. The star had to be six by four inches. This was a large size for my little girl's chest; nonetheless, we sewed them on all our jackets and coats.

Before we moved to the ghetto, something fateful happened, that as it turned out, saved my mother's and my life. This is how I remember it. My mama is bleeding. There is a dark red trail behind her as she leaves the bathroom. I am scared. She is so pale her face is white. She goes back to bed. The doctor says she has to drink a lot of fluids. The new maid is bringing her glass after glass of lemonade. Our old maid Eva is gone because Jewish people can't have Aryan maids. Eva is young and she loves me. This maid is much older, less attractive and a stranger to me. Everything is changing from comfortable to uncomfortable, and perhaps scary. I don't know what is happening and I am worried about Mother.

"Your all-time favorite Aunt Iren is going to Switzerland and she wants us to go with her," Mama said.

Aunt Iren and I were crazy about each other. She was like a grandmother to me. She had white hair though she was only in her forties. Her face was young, and to me very beautiful. In spite of her age, she wore always black. Perhaps she

liked the dramatic contrast of white hair and black clothes. She had a thin, elegant body. She worked for a nobleman as a secretary, but even I understood that she was more than that to him. He was of course Aryan and he later would help my mother and me to hide. Iren called me “angyalka” (little angel), and I call her “tunderi Iri” (fairy god-mother). She was my favorite. I liked to sit on her lap or commit some mischief around her. She couldn’t really be strict with me. She was childless and utterly fascinated by my charms. She often told this story.

“When you were about three years old and you were visiting me in my apartment you did something very naughty”.

“What?” I asked.

“While I was taking a bath you quietly cut up my bathing slippers with a pair of scissors”.

“Why did I do that?”

“That is what I wanted to know. When I asked, you said, “It was an accident”. I remember that the grownups thought that story was very funny.

So I said to my mother, “If Tunderi Irie is going to Switzerland then I want to go too. I have heard a lot about how that country is a free land for Jews. It is also the place from where my preferred chocolate comes. To be with Aunt Iren and eat a lot of good chocolate seems like a very good idea.”

But Mama was ill and she couldn’t travel. The doctor said she had to stay in bed. If she didn’t stop bleeding, she would have to go to the hospital. She would have to have surgery.

Mama and I were staying. A new Jewish law ordered us to leave our homes and go to a ghetto that is being created in Pest. The doctor said mother had to go to the hospital, and I should be sent to the ghetto with relatives or friends. Mama got up. She didn't want to be separated from me. We would go together to the ghetto. She stopped bleeding. The doctor wasn't surprised; he couldn't find anything wrong with her womb. It was all nerves.

Sometimes we would talk about Iren. Mama would muse, "She must be already well established in Switzerland."

"I miss her."

"I am sorry we aren't with her, but I am happy that she is free."

I don't know how much time had passed by when my mother received a note in the mail. It was a small piece of paper, muddy and wrinkled. On it were written a few words, faintly, with a pencil. "We have been deported in a wagon destined for Auschwitz. We love you. Iren."

Under my mother's address was a plea: "Please mail this note." She must have thrown the note out of the wagon and some merciful farmer picked it up and mailed it.

Time froze. My mother was silent. I didn't know what was happening but I felt her pain and I cried for Iren. My mother didn't cry, though she used to cry easily. She was sober and didn't chat as usual. My chest was heavy.

Some Jewish families did get safely into Switzerland. Unfortunately, many fell into the hands of *agent provocateurs* who took the money and sent the Jews to their deaths. Iren and her family fell into the hands of such a ruthless agent. I

remember her with a great feeling of love and loss. We never saw her and her family again. This is my most painful loss, though there were many others to follow.

With Iren Aunt Ilus, Cousin Vera and Cousin Roby were lost. Vera was twenty-four years old. I remember her as an attractive brunette who had a slight limp. The story of her disability was impressed on me early and powerfully.

Whenever I scraped my knee and fought against the burning iodine treatment, this is what I heard. "Do you want to limp like Vera? When she was a little girl she fell on her knee. Her scrape wasn't disinfected therefore got infected. She had to have an operation that left one of her legs shorter than the other."

This story helped me to endure alcohol and iodine on my wounds without a word. Vera was lively and easily given to laughter. She and my mother discussed endlessly their romantic stories and had fun together. She loved life so much and had so little of it.

Vera's younger brother was Roby. He was tall, handsome and sweet. He must have known that I liked him, because he often teased me with: "When shall we get married?" He was twenty when he had to go to "labor camp". I don't know in which camp he died.

Instead of going to Switzerland or Auschwitz, mother and I went to the ghetto that was on the Pest side of the Danube in a crowded neighborhood. Every family was allowed one room. The two of us lived in a dark room looking into the courtyard. This was very different from our sunny home in Buda. I played with the

other children. There were many of us. I even tried my first puff of a cigarette in a small alcove.

Every evening, in great secrecy, my mother and my aunts and uncles listened to the British radio. The news was dismal. Of course I wasn't told what they heard, but I could feel the atmosphere getting more and more tense. Sometimes, I overheard excited discussions about how things were going and what, if anything could be done.

I heard Uncle Dezso say, "If the labor camps are dangerous we shouldn't go when they call us in."

Somebody else answered, "But if we don't go they will arrest us. We have to follow the law."

Aunt Olga said, "Oh God! What should we do?"

There were those who were optimistic, (in hind -sight dreamers), and those who saw imminent danger looming over us.

In the meantime, we were under bombardment by British airplanes. The sirens sounded and the radio blared in German about imminent air raids. Often, at night, my mother would wake me up, bundle me into a warm coat, and run with me to the bunker in the basement of the building. These were peculiar experiences because we did want the Allied forces to bomb and win the war as fast as possible, but at the same time our lives were in danger from the bombs. We sat in the bunker listening to the detonations and thinking, oh good they are coming. We were also very frightened from the explosions.

One night while we were down in the shelter, we heard a tremendous sound and the walls shook violently. People in our bunker were yelling, "Oh God! We got hit. We won't be able to get out of here. We lost everything."

When we finally were allowed to go upstairs, we realized that our building was standing but the one next to us got hit. There was a crater-like hole in place of the neighboring house.

After we spent a few months in the ghetto, the Nazis ordered all the women to go to a "work camp". The children were supposed to be left behind and the "Red Cross" would take care of them. My mother's answer was that she would not be separated from me, but she didn't know quite what to do. She did something very smart; She got valuable information from a friend who was in the Hungarian Army. This act was very risky. She had to leave the ghetto without her yellow star and mingle with the rest of the population. She had to be unmarked. If the ghetto police or any other person on the street discovered her, she would be arrested if not shot on sight. Mother took the risk. She went to the office of the high-ranking officer she knew, trusting that he would not betray her but help her make a decision. She was not wrong. Her friend told her to go and hide somewhere with me after she obtained false Aryan papers. She thanked him and came safely back to me by sheer luck.

Where to find false papers? It was important to approach a person who could be trusted and who could provide papers that fit mother and I in age and sex. Our family owned a building in the city and its superintendent was such a person. He and his wife provided us with papers from their own family. Though I was nine

years old, I was supposed to be twelve to match the documents. Luckily, I was tall and I could pass. My mother rehearsed my new name with me. "Elisabeth, come here! You must listen to that name." I heard her say again and again.

I did my best, but it took me some time to get used to being called Elisabeth. I also had to memorize my birthplace and other personal details of the real possessor of the birth certificate. My mother's name became Bertha. There were no photographs involved. I am sure that today's false papers would have to be more sophisticated.

CHAPTER III

FUGITIVES

We had the Aryan papers, but we also needed a place to hide. The wonderful family of the super found such a place for us. His wife's sister owned a mountain refuge on Kohegy, (Stonemountain) where we were allowed to go to. This was a good solution since the mountain house was isolated and there was little chance of being recognized and denounced. It was also safer from bombings than the city. Kohegy is a mountain close to the town Szentendre (Saint-Andrew).

In the fall of 1944, we packed a bag with the most necessary clothing. Took off our yellow stars, and ventured out of the Jewish area at night, hoping to save our lives. My mother told me not to look scared, but smile at the Nazis whom we met. I wasn't scared because I was with her, but I knew that we were in danger. We needed a place to stay for the night. This time my mother put her trust in an old friend who had a private office in town. He was Aunt Iren's boyfriend the

nobleman, naturally a Gentile. Mother hoped that we could stay at his place until the morning.

“You can stay here overnight, but tomorrow morning early you must leave. I will have visitors coming,” the count said.

“That will be fine for us. Tomorrow we’ll take the train,” Mother said.

While we were there talking, somebody rang the doorbell. The count got very nervous and said; “You must hide quickly in the garbage shaft of the apartment.” We ran to the back of his office and found a small door that led to where the garbage was thrown. I remember clearly the claustrophobic feeling, and the bad smells in the shaft. I felt humiliated. I knew we hadn’t done anything bad, so why did we have to stay in the garbage? Once the visitor left we came out and slept on the couch.

The next morning we went to the Central Train Station of Budapest. When we entered I felt very little, like an ant. The ceiling was way up. Only train stations had such high ceilings. The structure was steel and glass. The noise was loud and the air was full of steam. It was scary and awe inspiring. I hang on to my mother’s hand tightly. We took the train to Szentendre, a small picturesque village on the banks of the Danube, only 10 kilometers north of Budapest.

The train ride was short, but for us it was quite dangerous. Whenever an official asked for documents, the possibility that we would be unmasked loomed in front of us. I knew this, but showed a smiling face as Mama had instructed. She trotted out her most vivacious self and chatted cheerily with the other passengers. I felt safe sitting next to her reassuring body.

We were lucky until the penultimate stop. Instead of the usual young Hungarian police officers, two SS officers entered the train to check the documents. Their black boots clunked heavily on the train's corridor, their clothing and their demeanor equally rigid. One of them could not have been more than nineteen-years old. His cheeks were still soft and pink. The other was older and looked more menacing with his Hitler moustache and steel-rimmed glasses. They checked documents randomly and we anxiously hoped that they would skip us, but no such luck! They stopped in front of us. The more intimidating officer extended his hand to receive the documents. Mama spoke German to them as she pulled out our birth certificates. He studied them carefully, looked up and said something to Mama in German. She took my hand and squeezed it firmly as we followed the SS officers off the train. They took us to a small office in the train station. Mama continued to smile, but it was obvious to me that we were in trouble. The SS officers ordered us to sit down while they returned to the train. We were alone in the office with a Hungarian police officer. He was a middle-aged man with a pudgy belly and a jovial face made heavy by a large moustache. The photo of a pretty woman and a young girl about my age sat on his desk. I had been taught in school that police officers protected children. Would this policeman protect me? He stood up, but stared down at his desk and shuffled some papers. We stood quietly in front of him. After what seemed an excruciatingly long time, he looked up. His blue eyes scrutinized us kindly before he finally spoke.

"I can't keep you here just because you look Jewish. You have Aryan papers. Go before the SS come back. Stay in town until the next train comes," he said.

Mama quickly pulled me up and was ready to dart out of the room.

“Thank you officer,” she said gratefully, and we were gone.

I don’t remember the name of the small town and recall almost nothing of what it looked like. We must have wandered for an hour or so until we could get the next train. Fortunately, we arrived at Szentendre without further trouble. Once we got off the train we had to climb the mountain. My mother knew somehow how to get to the trail that led to the refuge.

I remember enjoying being outdoors, and that the walk wasn’t too strenuous. Mother carried the bags and I hopped along. Finally, we got to a house standing alone on top of the mountain. This house was going to be our home for who knows how long? We stayed there for a few months. I don’t know exactly how long it was before the Russians liberated us. Winter came. It was cold and snowy. I had fun skating on the lake. I was quite a dare devil and skated to where the ice was thin and fell in the water. Fortunately it wasn’t too deep. Later I had a more serious accident. I took my sled down the mountain where no one else wanted to go because the slope was very steep. My sled picked up too much speed, and I could not stop. What stopped me was a tree. I came to consciousness under the tree with a very bloody nose. I had to be pulled back up the mountain with a rope. My mother was furious and she spanked me. She was scared. We couldn’t possibly go to a doctor or to a hospital. My nose was broken, and my face turned black and blue. I probably had a concussion too.

There was another mother and child hiding with us. We lived in the same room. The other child was a little boy about three years old. We had one scary

incident with them. At one point, some soldiers showed up at the refuge. They visited with us and though we all had false papers we were afraid that they might suspect and examine the boy's penis. Only Jewish boys were circumcised in Hungary. My mother was charming with the soldiers but the mother of the toddler was visibly scared. Mama chatted with them trying to have their attention away from the boy. All went well. One of the soldiers said to her, "Your daughter has such pretty dark eyes." (Most Hungarians have blue or light brown eyes). Mother lied, "That's because we are of Italian origins." The soldiers thought that I looked very Italian. Luckily they weren't suspicious. Mother was cool. I took that for granted then but now I really admire her.

Our lives were relatively comfortable. There was enough food, though not abundant. I remember eating a lot of potatoes that we roasted on the little stove that heated our room. I learned how to waltz from the other guests and played doctor with the boys my age.

The events that broke this idyllic life were the Russian bombings that came with accelerating regularity. The owners of the refuge dug a bunker in the ground and when the bomber planes came we ran toward the bunker. By the time we got there the planes were usually gone. In the meantime, we saw beautiful displays of the "candles" the Russians sent down to light up the area.

CHAPTER IV

LIBERATION

Finally, word came that the Russians were close. We were very happy in our Jewish room of fugitives though what came after wasn't what we expected. Our

happiness about the coming of the Russian Army was dampened by the realization that the owner of the refuge had a Nazi soldier son-in-law who came to hide on our mountain too. If the Russians had found him we would all be punished, may be shot. How could we explain to the liberating army that we were Jewish fugitives? We didn't speak Russian.

News came that the Red Army was raping its way through Europe. We also heard that they liked children and never hurt them, so we awaited them with mixed feelings. They came to the refuge twice. The first time was at night. In order to escape rape Mother hid behind me on the bunk bed where I slept. It worked. A soldier directed a flashlight on me but did not detect my mom under the blanket. The second time they came during the day when hiding was not possible. After they took my mother's watch and fountain pen, they commanded all the women to the barn. My mother was prepared. She heard that they were very afraid of tuberculosis. When they got to the barn she feigned a coughing fit so real that the soldier kicked her out of the barn. She escaped rape, but it must have been very disappointing to be treated like that by "the liberators". She tried to explain to them that we were Jewish by showing him our yellow star, but it didn't make any difference.

When the snow melted, and the country was free of Germans, and the Allies were in Budapest, we came down the mountain and attempted to go home. While going up to the refuge is very clear in my memory, coming down from the mountain is not there at all. I don't remember where we went first. I do know that our apartment in Hattyu Street was given to a family whose home was destroyed

by a bomb. In such cases there was no obligation to give apartments back to the Jewish families who originally lived there. We had to find a place to live. In the building my mother owned among the tenants were two sisters who lived in a big apartment and they were willing to rent us a room. We were allowed to take our furniture but there was no place to put it, so we stayed in one room of this lovely villa that belonged to us, in what used to be an elegant part of Pest.

DESOLATION

The period after the war was a very sad one. Those of us who survived met and were teary-eyed thinking of those who were missing, and there were many. My strongest memory is of a distant aunt, Be, who lost her twenty year old daughter, her husband, her mother, her sister and her sister's whole family. Her daughter's name was Magda. Magda was a University student. She had an Aryan fiancé, a lanky young man with thick glasses. He hid Magda in his apartment which seemed to be a safe solution. Unfortunately, the Germans stored explosive munitions in the building. During one of the British bombing the building was hit. That set of the explosives stored in the basement. What was left after the chain reaction was a mound of debris. Magda's mother told my mother and me that she and other relatives went to look for personal items or parts of their loved ones. I think she found some objects. When Be saw me, her pain was palpable even to a nine year old though she did not cry. She always talked about Magda. Her pain was like a heavy lead cover that came down on me. She was kind to me but had the saddest smile. I begged my mother not to visit her again. It hurt too much.

My family on my mother's side was completely annihilated. We found out that her uncle and family were hiding in Budapest but somebody denounced them and they were shot into the Danube. I want to write about them because I don't want them to be forgotten. I already wrote about uncle Dezso, aunt Olga, and cousine Yvette. I didn't tell you about the grandmother. Olga's mother was called Mutti by all. That ironically is the German way of saying mommy. She cooked the best chocolate cakes. She always made one when I visited and let me lick the bowls full of chocolate. Mutti did all this baking but could not eat sweets. She had diabetes and had to use saccharin. She was in her seventies when she was shot.

The survivors of my father's family were his two sisters. His two younger brothers, Tibor and Mihaly never came back. My aunt Jolan's husband and daughter survived too. Today my cousin Agi and I are the only ones left from that family. Nobody survived from my mother's family except her and me.

People often ask me if I have nightmares about the Holocaust. I don't anymore, but during my childhood I had a recurring dream. In the dream I am lying in the bottom of a very deep abyss or I am endlessly falling. I cry out "Ich bin unschuldig", "I am innocent". The peculiar thing is that I did not know and still don't know German.

This is the hardest part of writing my memoir so far. My memories are heavy they don't want to come to the surface. Why? Is it because of hopelessness and hurt? Or is it simply that I was too young to even absorb what happened? I don't know. Regardless of the difficulty, this time I am going to push forward in the fog. I think that fog accompanied me all my life. Often, when I tried to communicate by

speech or writing or singing, I felt that I could not get rid of something that separated me from others.

What was it like to be nine years old and to be one of the few survivors of genocide? Only one fifth of Hungarian Jewish children survived. The European statistics are even worse. Only one out of ten Jewish children survived the Nazi genocide plan. As I mentioned before, I don't remember much from this period. My memories are dim. There was relief but no joy in our liberation. What happened was too horrible to set aside and rejoice. Did I ask myself at the age of nine, "How could human beings be so cruel?" I don't think I did. I had accepted that it happened. It left me, though, with a profound distrust of Hungarians and an immense revulsion of Germans. For many years even the sound of that language made me shiver. Only now, sixty years later, I am able to see films about that period. I cannot go to Holocaust museums. I was in my twenties when I saw the play written from Anna Frank's diary. At some point during the play I could not suppress my sobs. My mother had to lead me out of the theatre. Did I cry because I felt the tragedy of the loss of such a wonderful human being as Anna Frank? Did I cry because I barely escaped the same fate? I don't know. The horror of it hits me even now. How terrifying 1944 must have been for my mother! I can't even conceive a life where my nine years old daughter is in danger from killers that had surrounded us. I can't conceive of a life when we have no defense, no recourse to save ourselves. No wonder, the strongest sensation I remember of that period is my mother's hand holding on tight to my small fingers. How brave she was. But

she was also lucky. How many little girls' fingers did the SS or the Arrow Cross tear out of their mothers' hands? We know they were countless.

Our emotional desolation was matched by the physical destruction of our city. Budapest, once a thriving metropolis lay wounded, moribund. The ruins of our bridges were reaching from the opposite shores of the Danube like arms of lovers that are too far to touch. The bombs had opened rugged gaps in the buildings. These gaps looked like the mouths of starving children. In the gaps, from half destroyed floors and walls hang furniture and personal objects, a doll, a rug, a kitchen sink or whatever happened to defy gravity after the bomb hit. The houses that were standing were pox marked by millions of shrapnels. The streets were silent and full of rubbish. There were corpses of people and animals to greet the citizens as they crawled out of their shelters. There were no trams clanking or buses tooting their horns. The city was desolate just like us.

Beyond the tragedy of losses what weighed on us after the war was hunger. The stores were empty and the persecuted and the bombed out had no reserves anywhere. How did we survive? There were places in the city where the country folks came to exchange food for other goods. I witnessed my mother giving a diamond ring for five kilos of flour. Another source of food was the convent near where we lived. The nuns opened a kitchen for the starving neighbors. They served a meal every day that we took out in our aluminum containers. The meals were of three kinds, beans, lentils or dry peas. To make it go down easier, I used to eat while reading a book about kids camping and eating barbecued chops. Before my mom discovered the convent meals, I used to go to a distant relative

who survived because she was married to an Aryan man and nobody knew that she was Jewish. She stayed in her home and had a pantry with provisions. She wanted to help the few survivors and resolved that the children were the most important to save. She invited me to eat a meal a day at her house. My mother would take me to this aunt and then she would leave. I suspect most often she was very hungry. Sometimes aunt Carrie would give her soup or other leftovers. Mama never complained but one day she put us on a train to the countryside where there was more food. We went to a town named Sarospatak where her voice teacher stayed. First she had a job in a kitchen and that meant bonanza. We ate and ate. The job didn't last long. I suspect my mother wasn't a good kitchen maid. Life was better though; somehow she managed to find food. I went back to school and remember having a short-lived religious period.

Stalinism came down heavily on my adolescent world. My mother and I welcomed the communists our liberators though we would have preferred the English and the Americans. We had no choice. It was the Red Army that liberated Pest first on January 17-18, Buda on February 13 and the rest of Hungary on April 4, 1945. Had the Russians not liberated Hungary at this time its Jewish population would have been completely annihilated. The remaining Jewish population that survived the genocide was one fifth of the population before 1944. In a few more months of the war the rest of us would have been killed too. No doubt!

The Communist ideology sounded very good. Many Jewish Hungarians joined the Communist Party. According to Communist theory anti-Semitism is one of the

symptoms of capitalism, it serves to ignite class antagonism. Anti-Semitism will cease when class antagonism is eradicated. Religion and ethnicity are irrelevant. We must become socialists, period. This was our new human ideal.

The main enemy was the bourgeoisie. Unfortunately a great number of the surviving Jews belonged to this category. The Communists persecuted them before they could recover from the horrible experiences afflicted on them by the Nazis. Everything that was left of their property was taken away from them. A large percent of the survivors lived in the capital. The Jews of the countryside were murdered by the Nazis almost hundred percent. Many of these survivors of the city were forced to relocate to the country. They were to become peasants after living their lives as city professionals. I heard my mother tell a friend that a far cousin of hers, by the name of Erzsi, after her relocation killed herself. I wondered if persecution would ever end.

Luckily my mother and I were not forced to leave the city. But the Communists took away our properties. They bought my family's twin villas from my mother for 1 dollar. Her sister Katherine, who lived mercifully in the United States, wasn't asked whether she wanted to sell her part of the property. The government simply took it away. Those properties are still not ours. I took my daughter and son to Budapest in the eighties and showed them what was ours but taken away. They couldn't believe that could happen.

In reality, we lived in a dictatorial regime. There was no free speech at all. For telling a joke you could get arrested and perhaps disappear forever. I wasn't singled out anymore to be oppressed; everybody was silenced, or worse, had to

tell lies. Nobody was allowed to have opinions that did not agree with the Communist dogma. My mother and I dared talking about how we felt and what we really thought only behind the closed doors of our home. Hungary was full of spies. That was part of the regime in all the satellite countries of Russia, as I understood later.

We also realized that equality meant poverty for all except the Red ruling class favored by the Russians. Our country's leaders kept disappearing too. They went to visit Moscow and never came back. My mother and I resented greatly the Iron Curtain that kept us prisoners in Hungary. I dreamt of becoming an opera singer and I wanted to study in Italy. That dream seemed completely unreachable.

There was a certain relief in not hearing the word "Jew." Religion was ignored. Oppression of religion was general. Nobody was supposed to be of any religion. Since we were never religious and our inherited religion was used against us as a whip, the relief from that whipping was life saving and uplifting. These were the good sides of the Communist era.

YEARS LATER

I would like to thank the people who saved our lives in 1944. My mother and I were saved by Hungarian gentiles who gave us their documents so that we could hide our real identities. Our own birth certificates testified to our Jewish origins. In 1944 in Hungary that meant that we had no right to live. I remember our rescuers though I don't remember their names. Who were the people who risked their lives and that of their families in order to help a Jewish mother and her child? Why did they do it? I know that my mother gave them money, but money alone could not

motivate such a dangerous endeavor. They knew, as we know now, that the Nazis ruthlessly punished those who helped Jews.

Perhaps my mother asked the super and his wife for help, or maybe they offered help. They were good people who must have been outraged by what was happening to decent Jewish families. All I know is that they provided us with papers from their own family.

I am not sure, but I seem to remember that the man who managed the mountain refuge was in the resistance movement. I can only guess that their motivation to hide us was political and humanitarian.

I would love to thank our rescuers, but I can't. They must be long gone, since they were in their forties in 1944. I don't know if my mother contacted them after the war ended or not. They were very hard times for all of us. We grieved for those who didn't come back. Survival was still difficult since there was precious little food in the city. After the war, we spoke very little about those dangerous and horrible times. During the Stalinist era, there was no mention of the persecution of the Jews. We were forced to forget. In our efforts to forget the horrors, we also forgot the good deeds. We forgot our rescuers. I wonder if the children and grand children of these good and courageous people even know how brave and generous they were. I could have, and should have, asked my mother many questions, but I didn't. She passed away a long time ago, and now I am left alone to remember. My knowledge is spotty and my memories are vague.

In spite of that, the significance of my rescuers is enormous. They not only saved my life and made it possible for me to have children and grand children, but they also made me believe that in the sea of madness and cruelty there is also compassion and heroic generosity. That thought helped me to keep on living and loving. Thank you my rescuers. Your names I have forgotten but your deeds I remember and cherish.

I visited Szentendre with my eighteen- year old son, Gabriel, and my cousin's daughter Andrea in 1988. Andrea drove us there in her small European make car. This is what the web site of the town writes in 2005. "Szentendre is a small picturesque art village on the Danube bank, world-renewed tourist attraction, 10 kms to the North of Budapest. Lots of cafes, galleries, restaurants, wine cellars small walking streets and very friendly atmosphere makes your trip memorable while staying in Hungary, if you are in Budapest then this is a "must-see" option in your diary."

In fact, when we visited in the eighties the town was like it is described above. The three of us went to museums and had a lovely lunch in a charming place. (I am sure that when my mother and I went there in 1944 this was a sleepy, simple old town). After our lunch we set out to find the mountain where the refuge that saved my mother's and my life stood. This was not easy. We couldn't find Kohegy on the map. We asked around in stores and finally the tourist information people indicated what route we should take to get to our destination. As we drove uphill the roads of the mountain got smaller and smaller. We drove on trails that had not seen many cars. We often thought that we were lost. My son kept asking, "Don't

you remember?" But I didn't remember. It was such a long time ago, and children see everything differently. When we finally got to the refuge -and it was still there- I was shocked how small it looked. I remembered a much bigger house. This refuge was smaller than the one family house I live in now. We took photographs of the house alone and with my son and myself. It was a very strange sensation to be there. I was happy to have Gabriel with me. I felt that I made it. I grew up and I had children.

At the present, I am reading the literature on hidden child survivors of the Holocaust. These are the writings of psychiatrists, the experts, and of the survivors themselves. They tell us that the life of hidden children was about giving up Jewish identity and it was about silence. I resonate to this. My Jewish identity is shaky and it is never public. I don't belong to any Jewish group. From time to time, I try religion but it doesn't last. The few times I participated in holiday gatherings I got depressed. My family was gone. I was in no mood to celebrate.

In the last few years this has changed. My daughter decided to bring up her two sons, Joakim and Benjamin, in the Jewish tradition. When I am with them on holidays I feel all right. During my older grandson's Bar Mitzvah I cried, but because I was moved. I am proud of my grandsons but I also fear for them. What if one day they will be persecuted too? Why not take their father's Gentile identity. In Jewish religious law if the mother is Jewish so are her children. Victoria, their mother, wanted them to be who they were. But it is hard. When we went to the synagogue in Oslo, where they all live, to participate in Joakim's Bar Mitzvah their father's mother was with us. She was shocked to see the armed vehicle with

Norwegian guards who were protecting the synagogue. Entering the high security building was complicated. I saw on her face that it dawned on her how dangerous it was to be Jewish.

Most of the writings about hidden child survivors date from ten years ago. As opposed to other Holocaust literature our group stayed silent for fifty years. I went beyond that, I stayed silent for sixty years. I am writing in 2005. Reading the literature, I realize that such strong characteristics of mine as being silent are shared with a whole group of people I have never met. I don't talk a lot. There are moments in my life when I feel mute. When people ask about my past I answer with evasions or with a word or two. It is like being constipated emotionally. What comes to my mind is something that happened in 1957 or 58 in Italy. I was on a bus. Two men were talking and said something like "Hitler did well to kill the Jews." I froze in my seat. I wanted to say something but I couldn't. I am forever grateful to people on the bus who told those men that they should be ashamed. The men had to get off the bus chased by the anger of the passengers. They spoke for me. I could not speak. Still to the present when I hear a nasty remark that is against Jews I freeze.

There are possibly irrational thoughts behind being silent. Such as, "If I don't speak about it then it didn't happen." Every time I speak about it I make it happen again. There are Jewish families where the parents are survivors and they don't tell their children that they are Jewish. I can understand that. It is easier to forget, or pretend to forget and start a new life. When I visited Hungary with my eighteen-

year-old daughter we stayed at my aunt Jolan's house. Jolan was very upset because her granddaughter Andrea was in love with an Arab man.

Andrea complained to my daughter and me, "My family is very upset because I am in love with an Egyptian man."

I asked her, "What does the family of your boyfriend say about the fact that you are Jewish?"

"I am not Jewish," she answered.

Victoria, my daughter, and I were shocked.

"Your mother is Jewish," I said.

"No, only her father was Jewish"

"But her mother is my aunt Jolan the sister of my very Jewish father."

Andrea said, "Oh!"

When we went back to my aunt's house Jolan said to me, "You know Andrea doesn't know that she is Jewish."

When I told her that her grand daughter knew now I detected a certain relief in my aunt's countenance. I guess, somebody had to tell Andrea the truth and none of them had the courage. To be a Jew in Europe might still be dangerous, they thought. That was the end of Andrea's romance with the Egyptian young man.

There are other characteristics of mine that I suspect had to do with my experiences in that period. Through my life I have lived in many places. I stay for a while and then I pick up and go to live somewhere else. I move with the ease of an air plant. I like to feel free to move. I don't feel rooted in any country or continent. If I am prevented by some circumstance to change my environment then I feel

trapped. What is good about this light footedness is that I am adaptable and have a wide-angle view of the world. What is painful about it is that I ended up living far from my children and grandchildren.

YEARS LATER

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My answer was, "She does now."

When I told her that her grand daughter knew now I detected a certain relief in my aunt's countenance. I guess, somebody had to tell Andrea the truth and none of them had the courage. To be a Jew in Europe might still be dangerous, they thought. That was the end of Andrea's romance with the Egyptian young man.

There are other characteristics of mine that I suspect had to do with my experiences in that period. Through my life I have lived in many places. I stay for a while and then I pick up and go to live somewhere else. I move with the ease of an air plant. I like to feel free to move. I don't feel rooted in any country or continent. If I am prevented by some circumstance to change my environment then I feel trapped. What is good about this light footedness is that I am adaptable and have a wide-angle view of the world. What is painful about it is that I ended up living far from my children and grandchildren.

